

My Cat Explains

FREE CHECKLIST

Normal or Vet? 20 Cat Signs

Cats hide pain and illness very well. This one-glance list shows which signs mean "go now," which mean "book a visit," and which you can watch at home.

🚨 See a vet now | 📅 Vet in 24–48 hours | 👀 Watch & log

The one sign every cat owner must know: a cat straining in the litter box with little or no urine, or suddenly peeing outside the box in small amounts, can have a blocked urethra. It is most common in male cats and can become life-threatening within a day or two. **Go to a vet or emergency clinic now.**

Not veterinary advice. This list does not diagnose anything. When in doubt, call your vet or an emergency animal hospital. Poison emergency: ASPCA Animal Poison Control (888) 426-4435 (a fee may apply).
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🚨 See a vet now

Call your vet or the nearest emergency animal hospital right away, and tell them you're on your way. Don't wait to see if it passes.

1. **Straining in the litter box: squatting for a long time, going back again and again, crying, with little or no urine**

   Can mean a urethral blockage, a true emergency. Without treatment it can cause kidney failure and death within 24–72 hours. It can look like constipation, so don't guess.

   Source: Cornell Feline Health Center; VCA Animal Hospitals

2. **Suddenly peeing outside the box in small spots, peeing often, or blood in the urine, especially in a male cat**

   Cats with a painful or blocked bladder often start going in sinks, tubs, on rugs or laundry. It's a medical signal, not spite. If there's any straining too, it's sign #1.

   Source: Cornell Feline Health Center

3. **Open-mouth breathing, panting, fast or labored breathing at rest, or pale, gray or bluish gums**

   Unlike dogs, cats rarely pant. Keep the cat calm and go.

   Source: VCA Animal Hospitals; AVMA

4. **Sudden weakness or dragging of the back legs, crying out in pain, cold back paws**

   Can be caused by a blood clot, which needs emergency care.

   Source: VCA Animal Hospitals

5. **Any contact with a lily (Lilium or daylily): a bite of a leaf, pollen licked off the fur, or water from the vase. Or dog flea/tick medicine with permethrin, or human pain pills like acetaminophen**

   All toxic to cats even in tiny amounts. Bring the plant or package with you.

   Source: ASPCA Animal Poison Control; U.S. FDA

6. **A seizure, collapse, or being unusually unresponsive**

   Source: AVMA

7. **Any accident: hit by a car, a fall from a window or balcony, a fight with a dog**

   Even if the cat seems fine. Internal injuries and chest trauma may not show at first.

   Source: AVMA

8. **String, thread, yarn, ribbon or tinsel hanging from the mouth or bottom, or known to be swallowed**

   Don't pull it. It can wrap around the intestines.

   Source: VCA Animal Hospitals

📅 Vet in 24–48 hours

Not an emergency on its own, but book a visit soon. If it gets worse, or any 🚨 sign appears, go now.

9. **Not eating for 24 hours (call the same day if the cat is also vomiting, hiding, or overweight)**
   Cats that stop eating can develop a serious liver problem (hepatic lipidosis) within days, especially overweight cats.
   Source: Cornell Feline Health Center

10. **Vomiting more than once in a day, or throwing up (including hairballs) more than about once a week**
    Frequent vomiting is not "just hairballs." It's worth a checkup.
    Source: Cornell Feline Health Center; VCA Animal Hospitals

11. **Diarrhea for more than a day, or any blood or mucus in the stool**
    Source: VCA Animal Hospitals

12. **Drinking a lot more water, or bigger clumps in the litter box**
    Often an early sign of common conditions in adult and senior cats that need a blood and urine test.
    Source: Cornell Feline Health Center

13. **Losing weight, even while eating well or eating more**
    Source: Cornell Feline Health Center

14. **Peeing or pooping outside the box with no straining**
    Rule out a medical cause first; behavior fixes come after. If you see straining, go back to sign #1.
    Source: Cornell Feline Health Center; ASPCA

15. **Squinting, a cloudy or red eye, discharge, or the third eyelid showing**
    Eye problems can get worse fast; don't use human eye drops.
    Source: VCA Animal Hospitals

16. **Bad breath, drooling, pawing at the mouth, or dropping food while eating**
    Source: AVMA; VCA Animal Hospitals

17. **Limping, a warm painful swelling (often a bite abscess), hiding much more than usual, or no longer grooming**
    Cats hide pain. A change in routine is often the only clue you get.
    Source: Cornell Feline Health Center; VCA Animal Hospitals

👀 Usually fine: watch & log

These are common and often normal, as long as your cat is eating, drinking, peeing and acting like itself. Watching is not an all-clear: if anything lasts, gets worse, or a 🚨/📅 sign appears, call your vet.

18 **One hairball or one vomit, then eating and acting normal**

Watch for repeats. More than once in a day moves to sign #10.

Source: Cornell Feline Health Center

19 **A few sneezes or a little clear eye/nose discharge, with normal appetite and energy**

Call the vet if it lasts more than a few days, turns yellow/green, or the cat stops eating.

Source: VCA Animal Hospitals

20 **Sleeping most of the day, night-time "zoomies," kneading, or scratching furniture**

Normal cat behavior. A sudden change from your cat's usual pattern is what matters.

Source: Cornell Feline Health Center; ASPCA

Litter box log (bring it to the vet)

Litter box changes are the #1 early clue in cats. Note what you see for a few days:

Date	Pee clumps (size/number)	Poop	Straining? Outside box?	Eating · drinking · mood

Tip: a short phone video of anything odd (breathing, walking, time in the box) helps your vet a lot.

Follow **@mycatexplains** for short videos where your cat explains its "weird" behavior, and when it's actually a sign to call the vet.

SOURCES

Cornell Feline Health Center, Cornell University College of Veterinary Medicine (vet.cornell.edu/fhc): feline lower urinary tract disease and urethral obstruction; hepatic lipidosis; vomiting; weight loss; house-soiling. · ASPCA Animal Poison Control (aspca.org/apcc): lilies, permethrin, human medications. · U.S. FDA: "Lovely Lilies and Curious Cats: A Dangerous Combination." · AVMA (avma.org): pet emergencies and first aid; dental care. · VCA Animal Hospitals (vcahospitals.com): aortic thromboembolism, linear foreign bodies, upper respiratory infections, eye and dental problems, abscesses.

Not veterinary advice. This checklist does not diagnose or treat any condition. In an emergency, contact your vet or an emergency animal hospital, or ASPCA Animal Poison Control (888) 426-4435 (a fee may apply). © 2026 My Cat Explains.